



# EXAMINING BREXIT: LEVELS OF ANALYSIS AND EXPLANATIONS

## Brexit: niveles de análisis y explicaciones

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This article analyses the scholarly debate on the Brexit phenomenon and its possible causes. By contextualizing Brexit in the International Relations Theory debate about the levels of analysis, the article focuses on some of the most recent contributions of the Brexit literature. Firstly, it analyses the contributions that explain Brexit as a problem of international and European politics, related to the adaptation of the United Kingdom to the process of European integration. Secondly, it analyses the contributions that explain Brexit as the result of causes located at the domestic level, such as the decisions and perceptions of national leaders, the decision-making process, and the impact of populist and Eurosceptic political discourse. The article identifies the advantages of an approach capable of considering both international and domestic variables. This allows a deeper understanding of the phenomenon and a potentially fruitful collaboration between political scientists from different disciplines, such as International Relations Theory and Comparative Politics.



**Abstract**

*El presente artículo analiza el debate académico sobre el Brexit y sus posibles causas. A través de una contextualización del Brexit en el debate sobre los niveles de análisis en la teoría de las relaciones internacionales, el artículo examina algunas de las aportaciones más recientes sobre el tema. En primer lugar, se enfoca en las contribuciones que explican el Brexit como un problema de política internacional y europea, relacionado con el complejo encaje del Reino Unido en el proceso de integración comunitaria. En segundo lugar, toma en cuenta las aportaciones que explican el Brexit como el resultado de causas ubicadas en el nivel doméstico, en las que destacan las decisiones y percepciones de los líderes nacionales, los procesos de toma de decisión, y el impacto de los discursos políticos populistas y euroescépticos. El artículo evidencia las ventajas de un enfoque capaz de tener en cuenta tanto las variables internacionales como las variables domésticas. Esto permite, por un lado, una comprensión más profunda del fenómeno y, por el otro, una fructuosa colaboración entre politólogos procedentes de diferentes disciplinas, como la Teoría de las Relaciones Internacionales y la Política Comparada.*



**Resumen**

Brexit; international relations theory; foreign policy analysis; comparative politics.

*Brexit; teoría de las relaciones internacionales; análisis de la política exterior; política comparada.*



**Key words**

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**Fechas**

After a tortuous debate in the British Parliament that was characterized by several delays, Brexit eventually became a reality on January 31<sup>st</sup> 2020. The British government and the European Union (EU) established a transitional period until December 31<sup>st</sup>, 2020, during which parties should negotiate their future relations, especially in terms of trade and circulation of people. The COVID-19 crisis has delayed this process, making the negotiations between the UK and the EU slower than expected. On December 24<sup>th</sup>, 2020, the EU and the UK reached a trade and cooperation agreement, which all 27 EU members approved on December 29<sup>th</sup>. This agreement is provisionally applicable since January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2021.

What this article explores are the possible explanations for Brexit. The last years have triggered an intense debate in social and political sciences about how to interpret this event. Understanding and explaining Brexit is one of the most interesting challenges for both theorists of International Relations and Political Scientists. The main goal of this article is to provide an analysis of the most important academic contributions on this complex subject. How can Brexit be explained?

The first section situates the Brexit debate in the context of International Relations Theory, with special reference to one of the most relevant issues in the field, which is the problem of the level of analysis to interpret international political events. The second section analyses the main contributions that have explained Brexit by focusing on systemic variables, that is variables which are located at the level of the international system. The third section expands the analysis of the literature, by focusing on those contributions that have explained Brexit from the point of view of domestic variables, that is variables that are located at the individual and national level, such as decision-making, social, and economic factors and the populist discourse. The last section summarizes the main findings and argues in favour of a type of analysis that can consider both systemic and domestic variables. This allows for a better comprehension of the phenomenon and facilitates an interdisciplinary collaboration among International Relations Theory and Political Science/Comparative Politics.

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## 1. The level of analysis problem in international relations theory

One of the most classic debates about the analysis of international events has historically centred around the level of analysis (Carlsnaes, 1992; Fearon, 1998). In his seminar work *The Man, The State and The War*, Kenneth Waltz critically discussed the main theories about the causes of war, by organising them into three different images (Waltz, 2001). The first image represents the individual level, which identifies the reasons for war in the human nature, as postulated by the early theorists of classic realism (Niebuhr, 1932; Morgenthau, 1948). According to this perspective, war and international politics are explained by the aggressive nature of human beings, which naturally tends towards conquest and competition. Along these lines, theorists tended to study the causes of international politics by focusing on the psychology and perceptions of state leaders. When making decisions, political leaders are influenced by cognitive processes embodied by their experiences and knowledge (Jervis, 1976; Larson, 1985).

The second image is at the state level. The causes of international politics would reside in the domestic characteristics of states, the nature of their political regimes (democratic or authoritarian), and the features of the decision-making process. The philosophical inspiration of

the second image mostly came from the writings of Immanuel Kant about the conditions to establish peace among states (Kant, 2008). Studying international politics from the point of view of the second image means to explain state behaviour, by focusing on the characteristics of its political system and society. In the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, one of the most relevant second-image approaches was the Democratic Peace Theory, which postulates that the type of internal regime would affect the propensity of a state to use war as an instrument to solve international disputes. Throughout history, authoritarian and democratic regimes waged a similar number of wars, but with an important difference. Democracies would tend to wage war against authoritarian states, and not against the other democratic states (Maoz & Russett, 1993; Bueno de Mesquita et al., 1999). Another important second-image approach is Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA), according to which, in order to understand the behaviour of a state it is necessary to study how its national interests develop at the national level and what type of domestic actors contribute to their definition and implementation (Hill, 2003).

Finally, third-image approaches postulate that the causes of international politics should not be found either in the personality of decision-makers or in the domestic features of national political systems, but, rather, in the anarchical structure of the international system (Waltz, 1979). The idea is that, lacking a centralised authority with the sufficient force and legitimacy to impartially enforce standards of behaviour on all the international actors, states, which would be the most relevant actors of the international system, are motivated to act in a non-cooperative and aggressive way. The lack of an international authority capable of providing states with security pushes states to pursue their own interests by following the principle of self-help. Each state takes care of its own security, independently of the others. Cooperation through international institutions would be sporadic and discontinuous due to the constant threat of war among states. According to this view, states are conceived as unitary actors, which means that they are fundamentally similar in terms of behaviour in the international system. The internal characteristics of states are not relevant variables to explain their international conduct because, due to the anarchic structure of the system, all states are forced to worry about similar problems, mainly their security and survival. This leads to the main assumption of third-image theories of international politics, which is that all states have similar and fixed interests that tend not to change. The only relevant variables to explain their different decisions would be the material distribution of capabilities, which affects their positions in the international system. Some states have more capacity to accumulate power than others, due to their material differences, such as size, population, geographical position, material, and economic resources. Most third-image authors also postulate that the most effective way to explain state behaviour is by assuming that states are rational actors, which interact with one another mostly for strategic reasons, with the goal of improving their security. Third-image theorists borrowed this assumption from the microeconomic theory of rational choice, according to which actors are able to calculate the costs and benefits of each action and make the decisions that allow them to maximize the former and minimize the latter. Both the rational and the unitary assumptions are what prevented these theorists from paying attention to the internal characteristics of states and societies because it is assumed that, since they are rational actors, all states pursue similar and security-related interests.

During the Cold War, and at least until the 1980s, third-image approaches, such as systemic realism and neo-liberal institutionalism, dominated the field of international politics. The anarchic structure of the system was considered the main variable to explain state conduct. Expla-

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nations tended to focus on the study of the international system, rather than on an understanding of the behaviour of its parts, with the goal of generating analyses that could be as applicable and as general as possible. States were assumed to be quite predictable actors that calculate their interests in a rational and unitary way (Allison, 1971).

The hegemony of third-image approaches started to be questioned towards the end of the Cold War. This event re-opened a debate about the levels of analysis that had been until then dominated by three structural approaches, such as state-centrism, structuralism, and globalism, reflecting neo-realist, neo-Marxist, and neo-liberal approaches, respectively (Sodupe, 2003). From this point of view, the theoretical approaches that study the role of domestic actors and factors in the production and implementation of foreign policy were marginalized (Hudson, 2014, p. 13). The fact that no structural approach was able to predict the end of the bipolar confrontation “reduced the belief in the stability of the system” (Hudson, 2002, p. 3). Many scholars found it necessary to elaborate analyses of international politics capable of considering the factors of change in the system, which means the ways in which interests are formed and pursued and the role of domestic actors and factors in the decision-making process. From this moment on, International Relations Theory was characterized by an emphasis on the study of the determinants of state behaviour, which was not assumed to be fixed and merely based on the search for security. This favoured the emergence of paradigms that had been disregarded during the Cold War, such as FPA, understood as the study of how national actors influence decisions concerning foreign policy (Hudson, 2014, p. 8). The domestic study of international politics required a more complex approach, capable of analysing international events from the point of view of multiple levels of analysis: the systemic level, but also the national and the individual levels. FPA was not the only approach to question rational and structural theories. One should add, at least, Social Constructivism. This approach had the initial merit to study international politics by focusing not only on the material aspects of power, but also on ideational factors, such as identity (Wendt, 1999) and culture (Katzenstein, 1996). Nevertheless, Constructivism too, in its initial phase, mostly focused on studying the interactions between the actors and the ideational and material structures that constitute the international system (Reus-Smit, 2009, p. 63). Successive versions of Constructivism contributed to recover the role of national actors and factors (Finnemore, 1996; Keck & Sikkink, 1998), by emphasizing the importance of studying foreign policy and the decision-making processes responsible for its implementation.

The FPA had the merit to emphasise the importance of domestic and individual variables that were already studied during the Cold War but that had been marginalized by structural approaches. For example, the “pluralist” approach, developed by Graham Allison, demonstrated that, when it comes to the production of foreign policy, we cannot simply assume that all states pursue similar national interests, determined by the international system, and implemented by states in a unitary way. Foreign policy is often the result of a competition among different actors, located at the level of the government or society (Allison, 1971). Instead of assuming that national interests are fixed, for Allison, there was a “pluralist political system” in which different actors compete for the elaboration and pursuit of the national interests (Hill, 2011, p. 6). This approach has contributed to expanding the type and number of variables that should be considered to explain international events: the perceptions of leaders (Jervis, 1976), the social and economic actors (Moravcsik, 1998; Simmons, 1994), the constitutional structures (Hill, 2003), the type of regime (Doyle, 1983), diplomatic negotiations (Putnam, 1988), the public opinion (Risse-Kappen, 1995), history (Khong, 1992), ideologies (Rathbun, 2004). and

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legislative assemblies (Beasley & Kaarbo, 2014). None of these studies is based on the idea that systemic and structural variables should be ignored. What they postulate is that they should be integrated with other variables, especially those located at the national level of analysis. The goal is to devise explanations of state behaviour and international events as “multi-factorial” phenomena, influenced by ideational and material factors (Mintz & Derouen, 2010, p. 3) and located at different levels (Hudson, 2014, p. 101).

The end of the Cold War not only favoured the theoretical conditions for the elaboration of multi-factorial and multi-level explanations. It also gave importance to the national experiences of states and societies that had been mostly neglected by the competition between the two superpowers. Second-image and area studies acquired more relevance and, consequently, there has been a growing interest in understanding how national and international factors can interact to produce international events. States are increasingly conceived as compound, not unitary, entities, whose interests are subject to constant processes of domestic competition and politization among a multiplicity of actors, such as legislators, governments, media, and civil society movements.

As any other relevant international event, Brexit has triggered similar debates. What are the elements that can explain the UK's departure from the EU? Are its reasons to be located at the international level? Is the explanation associated with the fact that the interdependence between the UK and the EU had become unsustainable? Or was it the consequence of issues internal to British politics and society? Or was it the result of some misperceptions and decision-making failures of individual leaders, such as Prime Minister David Cameron and his Cabinet? Obviously, there is no easy answer to these questions. Even though it is still quite a recent event, there is already a fairly rich literature on Brexit, which allows to identify some initial trends. Most analyses tend to locate their explanations at the *meso* level, that is, at the level of the state and its internal actors and factors. As I argue in the conclusions of this article, all explanations contribute to augmenting the understanding of Brexit. However, *meso* level theories have the potential to provide a more complete explanation of the issue.

## 2. Brexit: international and European system

One obvious way to approach the problem of Brexit is by resorting to European Integration Theory. This is a field that has generated many different frameworks to explain the processes that led a group of states to give up part of their sovereignty to create an “ever closer Union” (Wiener & Diez, 2005). In this respect, Simon Bulmer and Jonathan Joseph have argued that some of the most successful integration theories, such as Federalism, Neo-functionalism, and Inter-governmentalism, tend to study the process of European integration as the reflection of a series of “macro-structural influences” that can lead states to pursue different and competing interests, by advancing proposals for more or less integration. Some examples of these influences can be the “developments in the global economy” or “the general trend towards new forms of governance” (2016, p. 733). For example, one of the first theories of European integration, such as Federalism, explained integration as a response to the problem of “the threat of war”, as developed from “the practical experience of the Second World War” (Burgess, 2005, p. 31).

This interpretation is quite familiar to scholars of European integration. After the disaster of the two world wars and with the rise of the Soviet Union, a group of Western European states

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found the transfer of sovereignty to a union of states to be the most effective way to protect their interests and recover their international status.

The major response to this interpretation was the neo-functionalist theory (Haas, 1976). According to this approach, European integration would not be a completely intentional process but should be, rather, interpreted as the result of a process of “spill over” and of a series of “unintended consequences”. When they agree to create a supranational institution to pursue a technical goal, such as the management of coal and steel, states can end up discovering that the pursuit of this function can produce positive external effects on other issues and create a relation of interdependence. This can generate the desire to expand integration on other issues. Integration would not be the result of a planned and conscious project. It would be, rather, an irregular process in which governments can find themselves involved in a set of regional pressures that motivate them to solve their disputes by ceding a part of their sovereignty to a supranational entity (Schmitter, 2005, p. 46). The main engine of integration would be those regional pressures and structural influences that push states towards more integration.

Dissatisfied with this type of analysis, Liberal intergovernmentalism emerged as a possible response to neo-functionalism. Along these lines, Andrew Moravcsik proposed a less systemic theory according to which the EU would be the result of a set of rational agreements among states that decide to augment or diminish integration as a function of the pressures of domestic, social, and economic groups. Unlike Federalism and Neo-Functionalism, the preferences of the European states are not assumed to be fixed but they can change depending on the time or on the issue to be negotiated and depending on the type of domestic preferences at play (Schimmelfennig, 2005, p. 77). This means that, in order to understand the decisions of the states regarding integration, it is not sufficient to focus only on the “macro-structural influences” but also on the processes of formation of interests that take place at the national level. Through a revision of Robert Putnam’s (1988) “two-level game” theory, Moravcsik interpreted inter-state negotiations as a process of strategic interaction in which state leaders must consider the interests and desires of both domestic and international actors. This could explain the attempts by UK’s Prime Ministers Theresa May and Boris Johnson to strike a balance between the preferences of EU’s member states and institutions and the preferences of UK’s national actors, in the search for a reasonable withdrawal agreement. What leaders negotiate at the EU level need to resonate with British politics and society, which has the possibility to accept or reject through the Parliament.

Liberal intergovernmentalism focuses on the analysis of both structural and domestic factors, which allows for the elaboration of a more complete picture, as compared to Federalism and Neo-Functionalism. Nevertheless, it is still a rationalist approach that assumes that the preferences of national actors are somehow predetermined and not the result of a series of political and social conflicts about the nature of the agreements. This approach has the clear merit to study how interests are aggregated in the process of negotiation at the international level, but it does not facilitate an understanding of where those interests come from (Keck & Sikkink, 1998, p. 214). States are still assumed to be rational and unitary actors. Domestic actors do not play an independent role in the negotiations that take place at the European level (Schimmelfennig, 2005, p. 77).

In sum, these theories are useful to explain the phenomena related to European integration from a rational and structural point of view. Liberal-intergovernmentalism includes a partial problematization of national interests, through the study of the interactions between European and national interests. Nevertheless, it still tends to study European integration (and disintegra-

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tion) as the result of dynamics and processes that are located mostly at the international level. For example, in a recent analysis of Brexit, Kalypso Nicolaidis interprets the British referendum as the result of the debate between the necessity to create supranational mechanisms to facilitate the coexistence among European states and the necessity to protect national sovereignty. In this sense, Brexit would be the response to the attempt to strike a difficult and precarious balance between integration and sovereignty (2017).

From the perspective of the English School, Peter Wilson and Tim Oliver have elaborated an explanation of Brexit that is able to question the assumption of the rationality of actors. However, their conclusion too leads to an explanation that is still mostly systemic. For the authors, the origins of Brexit lie in the “ongoing tension between state-centric and cosmopolitan solidarism in Europe, particularly in sensitive areas such as migration and economic and monetary union” (Wilson & Oliver, 2019, p. 14).

As Christian Lequesne has argued, systemic approaches are greatly helpful to explain the negotiations between the UK and the other members of the EU. However, they are less able to explain the reasons why a majority of the UK’s society expressed the will to abandon the EU (2018). This type of explanation requires a domestic approach based on the interdisciplinary collaboration between the knowledge of national political phenomena provided by Comparative Politics and the knowledge of state international conduct provided by FPA. This allows to open the “black box” of states, that is to study how national interests are formed and developed, what actors contribute to their definition, and what types of political conflicts are fought at the national level to define the position of a state in the international system.

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### 3. Brexit: national and domestic politics

The main problem with rationalist and systemic approaches lies in their limited capacity to conceptualize the interests and identities of states as constructions that can vary depending on the interpretation that domestic actors provide of specific international events. Same actors can differently react to similar events, and this is often “a function of what happens at the domestic level” (Checkel, 1997, p. 477). Domestic actors often contribute to defining the role that their states should play at the international level (Harnisch, Frank, & Maull, 2011, p. 8; Holsti, 1970). Along these lines, Christian Cantir and Juliet Kaarbo have argued that “states frequently articulate, argue about, and legitimize actions based on what they believe to be their proper place in the realm of international relations” (2016, p. 1). When an issue like Brexit is discussed at the national level, legislative and executive actors provide their own representations of the issue, which means that they produce arguments in favour or against it. These arguments are not only based on structural factors, such as the position of their state in the global economy or its international alliances, but also on the perceptions of the role that the state should play at the international level. Brexit can be interpreted as the result of the dynamics between sovereignty and integration, but also as the result of a clash among different perceptions of British identity and interests. These perceptions can produce domestic agreements or disagreements among a wide range of actors, such as legislators, executive leaders, and public opinion. Roles and interests are not assumed to be fixed, but they are considered as subject to processes of political and ideological contestation. Depending on who wins these ideological debates, states can pursue different types of interests.

Studying Brexit from the perspective of FPA has several advantages. First, it can explain how the dominant positions about Europe within British society and politics can change over time. Second, by considering a larger set of individual, national, and international factors, it can offer a more complex picture of Brexit and its reasons. This somehow limits the possibility to produce generalizations that can be used to explain other cases. Nevertheless, the complexity and unpredictability of contemporary international politics makes it difficult to choose generalization over detail. As Valerie Hudson observed, FPA can bridge the gap between explanations based on material and ideational factors. According to this logic, the decision-maker, and not the unitary state, is the main focus to understand the influence of these factors on foreign policy-making (2014). Explanations are not reduced only to material or ideational factors but consider a variety of causes and factors (Mintz & Derouen, 2010, p. 3). Moreover, FPA facilitates the inclusion of culture and ideology in the study of foreign policy, by studying the influence of the national debates about what should be the most appropriate role of a state in the world (p. 12). The existence of a national consensus about foreign policy does not mean that this consensus can be later questioned or challenged (Cantir & Kaarbo, 2012; Thies & Breuning, 2012). FPA can help understand how and why these changes can occur, for example when national actors engage in a debate about the membership of their state to the EU. Finally, the essentially comparative and interdisciplinary characteristics of FPA can generate productive collaborations among different disciplines within the realm of social sciences. One of the main goals of FPA is to “compare similarities and differences across multiple cases using a comparative case-study approach” (Mintz & Derouen, 2010, p. 9). The analysis of the actors and factors that can explain foreign policy decisions create the conditions for a collaboration among International Relations Theory and other disciplines, such as Public Policy (Allison, 1971), History (Khong, 1992) or Social Psychology (Jervis, 1976). In addition, the emphasis on the necessity to explain the domestic and international dimensions of foreign policy in an integrated way means the possibility to establish a collaboration between International Relations Theory and Comparative Politics. Many international events are the result of phenomena that have to do with both the international system, such as patterns of cooperation and competition, and the national political system, such as the role of political parties and ideologies in structuring the position of a state in the world.

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### **3.1. Individual and Institutional Factors: Brexit as an Example of a Policy Failure**

Several scholars have interpreted Brexit as an example of failure in the decision-making process. An emerging literature, based on the re-interpretation of classic studies about perceptions and misperceptions (Jervis, 1976), has studied various cases of policy fiascos, understood as failures that take place during decision-making processes. A Special Issue of the *Journal of European Public Policy*, published before Brexit, can help understand the complex dynamics of British politics, especially in a historical moment in which it is more difficult for the Labour and Conservative parties to find bipartisan solutions. Jamie Gaskarth has, for example, explained the negative vote by the British Parliament to authorise military intervention in Syria in 2013 as a case of failure to exert leadership inside the Conservative Party (2016). Along similar lines, Julie Smith has argued that the most relevant explanation for Brexit should be found in an “unnecessary gamble” by Cameron. The main reason for the referendum was the necessity by Cameron to solve an issue internal to the Conservative Party (2018). It was the referendum

that contributed to politicise the issue of the EU within British society. By identifying a similar failure by British political elites to handle the debate about the relation between the UK and the EU, Colin Copus has focused on the mistakes made by the *Remain* campaign. By maintaining a delegitimising attitude toward the referendum, pro-*Remain* supporters contributed to diffusing a negative image of democracy within public opinion. This could have facilitated the victory of *Leave* (2018).

The study of the misperceptions of political elites can fundamentally contribute to the understanding of Brexit. However, its application to the study of Brexit has been so far limited. A possibly fruitful contribution could be the application of the literature on the influence of historical analogies on foreign policymaking. This classic line of research explains how elites often use and misuse history in order to justify current decisions (May, 1973; Khong, 1992). Its application to the Brexit case has so far been limited to studies of social archaeology (Bonacchi et al., 2018). However, the recent publication of an article on the use of historical knowledge during the Brexit debate in the House of Commons represents a relevant exception on which future studies can elaborate to shed light on this aspect of the process (Eaton & Smith, 2019).

Due to their interest in the impact of cognitive processes on foreign policy decisions, these studies can be located at the level of individual analysis (first image). These approaches can be very helpful in understanding the future of British foreign policy, understood as the result of a political debate between domestic actors over the definition of Britain's role in the world. The understanding of Brexit cannot be complete without an investigation into the ideas of contemporary British politicians, both from the government and from the opposition, regarding Britain's position inside or outside the European Union.

*The London vote, a global city integrated within the world economy, in which most of the population voted against Brexit*

### 3.2. The social and economic reasons for Brexit

A relatively rich literature on the possible social and economic causes of Brexit has emerged in the past four years. This literature has explained Brexit both as an event that finds its causes in UK's society and as the reflection of a series of phenomena that are present in other European countries. Among these authors, one can find political scientists, sociologists, and experts of electoral behaviour. These studies can be very helpful also for theorists of International Relations because they enrich the knowledge of a process that is inherently multi-dimensional and based on an interaction among national and geopolitical factors. Moreover, they explore the perceptions of the elites and the public about issues of identity and sovereignty, which have acquired great importance in International Relations Theory in the last thirty years.

Several studies have, for example, explored the geography of the vote in favour of leaving the EU, by showing how the referendum has left the UK quite fragmented from a geographical point of view. On the one hand, there would be the London vote, a global city integrated within the world economy, in which most of the population voted against Brexit. On the other, there would be the vote of the Central and Northern regions, less globalized and more inclined to vote in favour of Brexit. This representation of the Brexit vote was especially popularized by the media. Nevertheless, several analyses show that this division should not be overstated. Other types of divisions can be found within the same regions, with important differences between the vote of larger and smaller cities. For example, in London, Brexit was able to win in several areas of the city, which frustrated the hopes of *Remainers* who expected greater margins of victory in the capital (Harris & Charlton, 2016).

Other analysts have explained Brexit as a reaction against “the economic and cultural distortions of globalization.” Along these lines, Brexit would underscore the existence of two countries. On the one hand, that part of the country that has benefited from the opportunities generated by the common market. On the other hand, that part of the country that associate the free movement of people with a series of threats, such as “stagnant real wages, increased professional insecurity and cultural dislocation” (Blagden, 2017). An issue that contributes to reinforcing this cleavage is immigration (Arana, 2019; Wincott, 2017; Goodwin & Milazzo, 2017). Immigration would generate a sense of insecurity and resentment towards non-British residents. This feeling often manifests in the form of a perceived threat against the English national identity (Henderson et al., 2017). The migrant is frequently represented as an economic competitor and as a threat against the white and British majority (Stansfield & Stone, 2018). Many of those who voted for Brexit saw in the referendum the possibility of limiting these risks. The perception of threat against the English identity is often coupled with a feeling of mistrust towards processes, such as the common market and the free movement of people, that may limit British sovereignty (Wellings, 2019). This way, the social composition of the pro-Brexit vote is explained by referring to a complex coalition, largely involuntary, of “older, less educated, more socially conservative, and less economically successful” people who are against migrants and feel left behind (Sampson, 2017, p. 179). This is the reason why the pro-Brexit vote has broken, in many cases, the traditional party loyalties. As Lisa McKenzie has argued, it is not completely correct to classify Brexit as a vote of socially conservative “rage” or “apathy”. In many cases, the reasons in favour of leaving the EU were based on a mix of fear of social transformations and working-class concerns that felt left behind by traditional parties, including the Labour (2017; Watson, 2018).

Nevertheless, the debate on the social composition of Brexit is not over. Recent analyses have re-interpreted the data on the diffusion of the pro-Brexit vote to conclude that the rhetoric of the “forgotten people” who voted for Brexit should not be exaggerated. A significant portion of those who voted for Brexit also came from the “squeezed middle”, that is a part of the middle class with average education and income levels that have seen their positions jeopardized in the global age. A direct identification between lower and working classes and Brexit could be misleading since it would not consider the differences that exist in British society and within the same social classes (Nurse & Sykes, 2019). Furthermore, one should not neglect the potentially more dangerous dynamics of the vote in Scotland and Northern Ireland, which, in many cases, has followed nationalistic and unionist lines that threaten to re-open ancient wounds and rivalries (Gormley-Heenan & Aughey, 2017).

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### **3.3. The impact of populist discourse on Brexit**

A final element that has been underscored by the recent literature on Brexit is the impact of populist and Eurosceptic discourses. While populism has been largely studied in the fields of Political Science and Comparative Politics (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017), the analysis of its impact on foreign policy has so far been more limited. The end of the Cold War and the global era have contributed to reducing the national consensus about foreign policy within many societies. As Bertjan Verbeek and Andrej Zaslove have argued, these transformations have favoured a reconfiguration, within many Western political systems, of the political space for electoral competition (2017, p. 385). Along these lines, Angelos Chrysosgelos has proposed to isolate the anti-elitist and anti-pluralist components of populism to understand its impact on foreign policy discourses. This

allows to identify foreign policy positions that are common to both right-wing and left-wing populist movements (2010). By conceptualizing populism as a foreign policy discourse that often goes beyond traditional left-right divisions, Chrysogelos has concluded that populism would represent the opposition to the internationalization of the state in the global era and a reaction to the progressive isolation of the political and economic elites from popular demands (Chrysogelos, 2018).

Although there are few studies that have attempted to make explicit the relationship between populism and foreign policy, there are scholars who have identified the populist discourse as one of the catalysts for Brexit. For example, Jonathan Hopkin has explained Brexit as the expression of “an anti-market counter-movement” (2017, p. 475). Others have referred to the anti-political nature of populism to interpret Brexit as the expression of the lack of trust of the citizens towards the traditional parties (Marsh, 2018). The main reason for this resentment against traditional politics would be its perceived incapacity to solve the problems generated by the economic crisis (Pirro, 2018). Other authors have associated the Brexit vote with right-wing populist parties, emphasising the nativism and anti-elitism of many pro-*Leave* voters (Wilson, 2017; Iakhnis et al., 2018). At the basis of these ideas, there would be a perceived necessity to re-structure British capitalism to protect it from the global competition and make it accountable only to British citizens (Nolke, 2017).

What is important to underline is that behind the pro-Brexit vote one can find the populist and Eurosceptic discourses of both left and right. Kevin Hickson and Jasper Miles have, for instance, analysed the Eurosceptic tradition present in the Labour Party, which has been criticised during the Brexit campaign for the ambiguous attitude of its former leader Jeremy Corbyn. This tradition is articulated as a defence of British sovereignty, through a series of policies that should protect the economic autonomy of the island against the capitalist excesses of the common market (2018). Many authors have contributed to breaking some false myths about the supposed Europeanism of the Labour Party, by presenting historical analyses of the evolution of its positions on the EU. Eurosceptic until the 1970s, the Labour Party started to embrace Europeanism since the early 1980s, in the attempt to take electoral advantage of the anti-European sentiments of the Margaret Thatcher’s governments. Under the Tony Blair’s leadership, the Labour Party seemed to have turned into a Europeanist party. However, a minority of its voters maintained a Eurosceptic attitude, forcing its leaders to take a “Euro-pragmatic” position, which is prudent about the effects of integration and quite far from the Euro-enthusiasm of continental social democrats (Diamond, 2018). Finally, there are authors who have not seen a clear relation between the Brexit vote and either the right-wing populism of the UKIP, or the left-wing Euroscepticism of a part of the Labour Party. According to these analyses, Euroscepticism has always been present in British society, within both the elites and the citizens. Euroscepticism emerged, for example, in the decision to opt-out of the European Monetary Union and was, later, reinforced by the negative effects of the economic crisis. These effects contributed to spreading a negative image of the EU, and not only within a specific party (Gifford, 2016).

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#### 4. Conclusion: implications and future scenarios

Most of the literature tends to be pessimistic about the future implications of Brexit, especially for the UK. Some of the risks are related with the possibility that Brexit triggers a dynamic of disintegration in which the areas that voted in favour of the *Remain*, such as Scotland and Northern Ireland, might decide to leave the UK (Blagden, 2017). Furthermore, by leaving

the EU, the UK could experience a significant loss of diplomatic leverage (Rees, 2017). For example, Graham Wilson has observed that Brexit could mean a reduction of the diplomatic prestige of the UK, by diminishing its ability to exercise soft power and act as a mediator in various crises (2017). While everybody agrees that the future relations between the EU and the UK should be oriented towards collaboration, the inability to make a clear exit plan could undermine the security of the country, which could find itself internationally more isolated (Howorth, 2017). For example, the formation of regional alliances within the United Nations General Assembly has become quite important in the conduct of complex international negotiations. In many cases, the EU has represented a useful platform during diplomatic interactions with other countries (Dee & Smith, 2017). Finally, there seems to be a consensus in the literature about the fact that Brexit will have negative international economic consequences for the UK, which will find itself lonelier during commercial negotiations with the other world powers (Sampson, 2017; Wilson, 2017; Wincott, 2017). This trend could be reinforced by the recent victory of Joe Biden in the U.S. Presidential elections, which has left *Brexiters* without the support of former President Donald Trump.

Other authors have maintained a more cautious stance and have limited themselves to analyse the challenges of UK's foreign policy outside the EU (Wincott, 2017). On the one hand, the possibility to establish deeper relations with non-Western powers, such as China, is generally seen problematic due to the potential negative effects that it could have on the relations between the UK and the United States (Crookes & Farnell, 2019). On the other hand, some scholars have focused on the analysis of the proposal for the development of a "Global Britain" strategy. Originally launched by former Prime Minister May, this idea is based on the intention to draft a series of cultural, commercial and security cooperation agreements with both the EU and other non-European states, such as the United States, India, Australia, and the Gulf countries. Nevertheless, as Oliver Daddow has shown, it is not entirely clear how this strategy could successfully combine the relations with Europe and those with other powers (2019). The main challenge would be the necessity to devise a "polycentric diplomacy", through a partial redefinition of UK's international relations, aimed at developing different diplomatic schemes with different countries and regions, sometimes contradicting each other (Whitman, 2019). The main risk could be a "disoriented foreign policy". The country could aspire to play different but also contradictory roles, for example, by trying to be simultaneously a world power, a regional ally of the EU, the leader of the Commonwealth, an autonomous commercial power, and a faithful ally of the United States (Opperman, Beasley, & Kaarbo, 2020).

From the point of view of the EU, the departure of one of its most powerful members is hardly good news. This could further reduce the EU's international projection, already limited by the difficulty of reaching a common competence in foreign and security issues. Moreover, Brexit could eliminate an important balancing actor, which can mean a Union even more dominated by the Franco-German axis (Larsen, 2018). However, the clearest risk is the possibility that Brexit can trigger a process of disintegration of the Union, in the sense that several Eurosceptic sentiments could be reinforced in other European countries (Martill & Sus, 2018; Zielonka, 2018). Nevertheless, this might not necessarily be the case. As Marlene Wind has observed, since the 2016 Brexit referendum, Euroscepticism has not obtained significant results in any of the countries of the Union, with the important exception of Matteo Salvini's La Lega in Italy. Before making any serious evaluation of the Eurosceptic challenge in Europe, one should also wait for the next 2022 French Presidential elections. In addition, it should not be forgotten

*From the point of view of the EU, the departure of one of its most powerful members is hardly good news*

that the UK's participation in the EU has always been characterized by a certain autonomy and independence. In this regard, Uwe Puetter has argued that, several years before Brexit, the UK and its representatives never really made much effort to improve their relations with the EU. For example, they isolated themselves from some of the most important debates in the Council and in the European Parliament. In this sense, it is not clear that the UK's departure necessarily represents a notable change in the inter-institutional balances in the Union (Wind, 2017). The UK's departure could even become an opportunity to start a debate on the future of EU's integration. Several lawyers have, for example, stressed that Brexit might force member states to reform some of the constitutional rules of the EU, such as the Council decision on the future composition of the European Parliament and the rules on the financing of the Union. This could lead to further discussion on how to reform the Treaty (Fabbrini, 2017).

This article had the main goal to analyse the most recent academic contributions to the Brexit debate. What is important to observe is the necessity to explain the phenomenon by integrating different perspectives, capable of including in the analysis both domestic and international factors. Focusing only on one level of analysis might not be enough to explain complex events that involve a multiplicity of variables and actors. The integration of different levels of analysis can be greatly useful to augment the comprehension of international events. An interactive approach can explain how the identities and interests of states can change over time and produce different types of foreign policies. It can offer more multi-dimensional and multi-factorial explanations that escape the limitations of mono-causality. Finally, it can favour fruitful collaborations among different disciplines, most notably Comparative Politics and International Relations, which is coherent with the interdisciplinary nature of International Relations Theory. Recent contributions within the field of FPA are going precisely in the direction of an interactive approach to the study of international relations. By overcoming the traditional dispute about the pre-eminence of domestic or international variables, an interactive approach studies foreign policy preferences as the result of the interaction among internal and international dynamics (Hudson, 2005; Brighi, 2013). Foreign policy decision-makers are analysed as strategic actors whose preferences are not fixed but constructed by the circumstances provided by both internal and international structures. These circumstances are mediated by their ideas and perceptions which "provide the point of connection between the internal and the international strategic environments" (Longo & Rossi, 2019, p. 52). Integrating different levels of analysis, actors, and factors in the analysis of foreign policy promises to take advantage of the interdisciplinary nature of International Relations Theory and produce rich and useful explanations of international politics.

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